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ABSTRACT

Hundreds of suitable books are available to include in a reading program to supplement the prescribed social studies curriculum. Gordon Parks's book "The Learning Tree" reflects three criteria teachers should consider when selecting books for use in a supplementary reading program. First, the story has what one reader called "cool writing," that is, an uncondescending simplicity, characters with genuine depth, and a consistent point of view. Second, it generates introspection and thoughtful consideration, promoting discussion on values, alternative points of view, and content of past and current events. Third, the book gets the students involved in what they are reading and learning. Such involvement must come through the emotions, and textbooks tend to be dull as they provide only narrative, factual information. Supplemental reading, however, can convey much better the "reality" of the Great Depression, the Nazi concentration camps, or being under fire during battle. (HTH)

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KNOWING AND CARING

TOWARD AN EFFECTIVE SOCIAL STUDIES READING PROGRAM

by Russ Hubbard

To know something about a topic means that one has information about the topic, information which is understood and which, ideally, can be used in one way or another. To care about something known is to have some personal investment in the knowledge, to value the information one has and, perhaps, to want to learn more. Knowing and caring are the two crucial elements in any educational process. One without the other is either mindless emotionalism or lifeless intellect. My belief is that both can be and should be present in an effective Social Studies reading program.

My concern here is with supplemental reading, not textbooks, workbooks, or the like. What I would encourage teachers of all grade levels to plan is a reading program which supplements the prescribed curriculum. Hundreds of suitable books are available--books which are well written, which can induce thinking and which have an emotional impact. The only problem a teacher faces is winnowing from the hundreds available, quality books which serve educational aims.

In the geographic region of the country I hail from various citizen groups have been formed to oversee and challenge aspects of the schooling scene. One such group, with a particular concern about the ethical life of their children, has challenged the desirability of books used in various classes and available to adolescent and pre-adolescent children. Gordon Parks' book The Learning Tree has received a lot of this group's attention and energy in efforts to have it banned. My fifteen year old daughter, Carolyn, had read it, and I asked her for an opinion. Her response was "Cool

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writing; made ya think; got ya involved." That terse opinion started a discussion and formed the basis for this paper. For she had encapsulated the three criteria I would have teachers consider when selecting books for use in a supplementary reading program.

"Cool Writing"

Carolyn liked The Learning Tree, as did I. We both initially responded to the style of writing. The book had an interest catching and interest keeping quality which made it hard to put down. We identified other books we have enjoyed and from the list, teased out three qualities of "cool writing."

First, simplicity. The story is simply told. The plot is unambiguous; the author does not lose the reader in a maze of asides or sub-plots. This quality does not mean that the book is simplistic nor does it mean that the author patronizes the reader with Dick-and-Jane style language. The book may be about a quite complicated set of events (viz., Johnny Tremain by Esther Forbes) yet the telling does not impede understanding.

Second, real people. The characters in the story have depth, realness or character. It is possible for students to identify with them and to think that, had they been in the book and part of the action, they'd have acted in similar ways.

Third, point of view. The author maintains a consistent perspective, not shifting from a first person involvement to a third person omniscient detachment.

These criteria help identify "cool writing." A text on children's literature also mentions such considerations as pace, distance, tone, theme, and setting. (Sebasta, 1975. pp. 58-86) Still, matters of style are matters of taste--de gustibus non disputandum est. If a book simply isn't to one's liking, I recommend setting it aside.

"Made Ya Think"

What Carolyn meant by this was that the book opened her eyes to something she'd not experienced before: a world of which she was only dimly aware. She learned something about racial discrimination and she had some of her own values about family life reinforced. She was able to relate and to compare parts of her own experience to what she had read.

Such an outcome surely lies at the heart of Social Studies education. It has to do with knowing. We want our students to know and understand the experience of other people in other times and places so as to better understand their own condition. We want students to know and understand that there are diverse ways of being human, so as to reduce national arrogance and to enhance international understanding. We want students to know and understand that the problems of wealth and poverty, freedom and control, law and order, are difficult and involved, so as to develop a healthy skepticism toward political shamans and simplistic solutions. Books are still the most available and the least costly means at our disposal to accomplish such goals.

One area in which thoughtful consideration of issues is most important is that of values education. In their reading, students will encounter problematic situations in which value choices must be made, or in which dearly held values collide. Gentlehands by M.E. Kerr is one such book, replete with opportunities for thoughtful discussion of moral issues. The culminating value issue in this book occurs when the townspeople learn that the quiet, kindly, and cultured old gentleman who lives alone on the hill had been a notoriously cruel guard at a Nazi concentration camp. Moral dilemmas arise one after another as the young grandson, learning of his grandfather's past yet loving the old man, has to decide how to act toward him.

Enough has been written about cognitive moral development and the classroom application of Lawrence Kohlberg's work to provide teachers with some guidelines for the use of moral dilemmas. The first and central point to make is that how one decides a value question is less important--at least as far as values education is concerned--than the reasons for the decision. Students' answers to value dilemmas can help a knowledgeable teacher challenge them to think about differing opinions, some of which will reflect a higher level of moral development. If including this sort of values education activity appeals, and I hope it does, I'd recommend Galbraith and Jones, Moral Reasoning as a useful guidebook. It explains Kohlberg's stages of moral development and provides samples of classroom activities which can be used as models for similar activities drawn from the books which students read.

A second category of thought-provoking books is the "alternative point of view" type book. In Social Studies classes, we run the risk of teaching students only one perspective or interpretation of an historic or current political, economic or social event. Too often this monocular kind of schooling is fostered by textbooks. Through a supplementary reading program, a teacher can provide students with differing points of view as well as more specific information about a topic. With many high school students, Oliver Wiswell by Kenneth Roberts has always been a successful book. Through its recounting of the effects of the American Revolution on the Wiswell family, the book presents a point of view to balance the more common draped-in-the-flag righteousness of the patriots. There was, after all, an opposing point of view in those days and Oliver Wiswell presents it.

More recently, another book about the Revolutionary War has done the same task for younger readers. My Brother Sam Is Dead by James and

Christopher Collier raises issues of loyalty, of having to choose between opposing sides, of the clash between father and son, of the mindlessness and injustice of armies, and of the resignation with which helpless civilians had to face the intruding friendly as well as hostile armies. These are issues which adolescents can understand and which outside reading can lead them to discuss in ways no textbook can.

A third way to facilitate thinking about and understanding of past events or current issues is to let the reading material itself teach the content. Well written books can transport students to other lands or past ages and can foster geographical or historical understanding. The delightful thing about such learning is that it is a painless way to add to one's storehouse of knowledge. For decades, children have been accruing information from comic books and from television, and happily, there are excellent books to accomplish the same ends. One of my favorites, E.L. Konigsberg's A Proud Taste for Scarlet and Miniver, is a marvelous vehicle for fostering learning about the politics and general history of the late Middle Ages in England and France. Many of the books considered each year for Newbery Awards or as ALA Notable books teach history, geography, government, economics, and sociology painlessly to unsuspecting students.

To summarize to this point, outside reading programs can and should include reading material which involves students in thoughtful consideration of alternative points of view, which teaches content by offering historically or geographically accurate and reliable information--whether the book be factual or fictional--and which engages students in consideration of value issues and ethical decisions. Cool writing can indeed facilitate thinking.

"Got Ya Involved"

I hope fervently that what is true for me in my teaching is equally true for you: I want my students to care about what they learn. I'd like what they learn to affect them, to make a difference in their lives. Just knowing isn't enough; caring is needed, too. Thus, as a high school teacher I searched for ways to get my students involved in their learning assignments.

I stumbled onto my own most successful ploy more by one of those fleeting moments of pedagogical luck than anything else. I had in my class a student whose interest in U.S. History lagged just behind his concern with Iowa grasshoppers. He would not read the textbook; he would participate in class discussions as long as such discussing could be done without having read anything. Reading was an anathema. However, to get out of the class with a passing grade, he had to read something other than the text. He asked me for a book which would be fun to read and didn't have much to do with history. I suggested William Lederer's All the Ships at Sea, a collection of bawdy sea stories set in the World War II Pacific theater. The madcap adventures of Ensign O'Toole were simply funny. Deep, no; but for this student, engrossing. He came back a week or so later and asked if I had any more like that. I did: Lederer's next book, Ensign O'Toole and Me. In this book, Lederer began to sharpen the axe he had introduced at the tail end of his first book: the stupidity of American foreign policy in Southeast Asia. A week or so later, the student returned, hooked. He told me he was interested in learning more about what Lederer was writing about. Yes, he enjoyed the bawdy stories, but he was also getting interested in Lederer's axe. By the end of the term, this student had read Lederer's Sarkhan, and The Ugly American, and had obtained as good a grasp on far-eastern American foreign policy as any student in the class.

Please understand that he did not know the current facts and actors. His historical background knowledge was shakey; he'd not have done well on a factual test on the subject. His knowledge was allegorical. He had studied the topic through fiction and, having been caught up in Lederer's books, had gained a perspective with which to read newspapers and to listen to politicians. In addition, he had been seduced, if you will, into learning. The route of seduction was through books; the allure was through an appeal to his emotions, as is true of all good seduction.

And talk about seduction leads to the core of this paper: the balance between reason and emotions. My plea to all teachers is: do not downplay the emotional power of books; select books with that very power in mind.

Involvement in reading must come through the emotions. Books such as textbooks which provide only narrative factual information, tend to be dry and dull. If that is the sum of Social Studies reading, then students are being shortchanged indeed. Worse, lifeless texts convey a tacit message that human history and the search for justice--or any other Social Studies theme you like--is dull stuff. It isn't. Yet dullness is often justified in the name of objectivity, accuracy, and intellectual understanding. And this lopsided emphasis on intellect does a disservice to our students.

A frequent villain in TV science fiction is the over-intellectualized brilliant scientist (with a soaring forehead) from an allegedly superior race. I recall watching one such program in which the villain could kill by mind power alone, and did so to the consternation of his earthly collaborators. In all such programs, the attribute which the earthlings have which the brainy other-worldly visitors do not, is emotionality: feelings of anger, chagrin, remorse, disgust, joy, love--feelings which "do not compute," feelings which the over-intellectualized beings are incapable of understanding.

These super-brains are incapable of understanding simple emotions because feelings are, by their very nature, non-rational. They are not capable of being apprehended intellectually; they can only be felt. Only abstract ideas, concepts, procedures and problems are capable of cognitive comprehension. Discussion about feelings can, of course, occur at an intellectual level. We can have an intellectual grasp of the properties of, say, anger. But the feeling itself is non-rational, not apprehendable by mere reason. That is why big-brained boobs from Betelgeuse cannot understand humans, because their intellectual powers do not have the property of emotional understanding. Intellect alone cannot grasp feelings.

My belief is that schools are pretty good at teaching toward intellectual development. We have inquiry procedures and convergent questioning techniques; we can teach to objectives and we evalute student's work in the cognitive domain. But I believe that we are not doing a very good job in educating the emotions. In his book Learning to Feel - Feeling to Learn, Harold Lyon speaks of intellectual half-men, graduates of our educational institutions who are competent and even excellent in intellectual tasks but who lack a sense of compassion, of joy in learning, or of a felt purpose for their endeavors. His point, as mine, is that the schools have not done a very adequate job in educating the emotional or intuitive part of one's mind, or in helping students develop an emotional as well as rational understanding of their studies.

We have no word in our language for the sort of emotional understanding I'm advocating. We can "know" that John Hancock and company put their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor on the line when endorsing the Declaration of Independence. We can intellectually understand that if they were caught by the King's soldiers, they could reasonably expect to forfeit their

lands, their homes, their wealth and their lives. But knowing this cannot convey to a student the courage, the anger, the resolve, the strength of will which lies behind such an act. Such understanding--and again, we have no word for it--can only be had through one's feelings.

How can teachers convey to students the reality--not just the intellectual understanding--of life in a depression, in a concentration camp, in a battle under fire, of growing up in a Vermont logging camp in the late 1800's, of being a black youth in a white country, of poverty in Mexico or, for far too many who have not experienced it, the joy of being loved? Such learnings cannot be directly taught. And to attempt to do so raises the possibility that students will think that such learnings are mere intellectual constructs with no validity or relevance for their own lives or for the "real" world. We should not endeavor to teach empathic understanding in the same way that we teach data, concepts, or procedures for weighing options in making a rational decision. To do so runs the very real risk of losing the human element which enlivens social studies education.

Empathic understanding can, however, be facilitated through reading. To get students involved in learning, a teacher need only provide learning experiences which have emotional power. Where direct experience or simulated experience is impossible or undesirable, vicarious experience can serve. The Learning Tree involved my daughter emotionally. I was dewy eyed while reading Sounder and downright weepy at the end of Where the Red Fern Grows. I experienced fear and horror at episodes in Gentlehands, laughter and the warmth of affection during parts of Ida Early Comes Over the Mountain, pride and triumph in John Hersey's A Bell for Adano, and I was appalled (and educated) by his classic study, Hiroshima. I learned much of politics through T.H. White's The Sword in the Stone, and I enjoyed it because I could identify with and

become emotionally involved with the characters, especially young Arthur. The list could go on and on, and you can add your own favorities.

Cool writing, made ya think, got ya involved. These three criteria for books in a social studies reading program quite clearly are interrelated. When a teacher has prepared for his or her students a list of well written books which raise issues for thoughtful discussion, which teach reliable and accurate information, and which have emotional impact, then a rare gift indeed has been prepared.

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